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What Shall It Profit America?

By ALEXANDER DUANE

Reprint from the Phi Beta Kappa Key

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Reprint from the Phi Beta Kappa Key, May, 1921.

WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT AMERICA?*

By Alexander Duane, M. D., Union '78

What shall it profit America if she gain the whole world and lose her own soul?

The question was prompted by a survey of our history during the past seven years. The story of that survey can perhaps best be told by linking together a few quotations from actors in that momentous time—quotations showing better than any description of mine how men wrought and felt.

Let us hark back to the first years of the war. The German hordes, splendidly equipped, and drilled for this very purpose, had crushed their brave, but unprepared opponents. They had swept over and ravished with thoroughness and calculated cruelty brave little Belgium and northern France; they had pushed back and almost annihilated the wonderful little band, the old "contemptibles" of England's regular army. Temporarily checked, it seemed as if ultimately by sheer force of numbers and organization they must eventually overrun the whole of France and dictate a peace which would mean the triumph of absolutism in Europe and ultimately its triumph in the world.

There went up a call for help—an appeal to civilized men to check this new torrent of barbarism. The call to resist was voiced most movingly in the words of John McCrae, familiar to you all:

> In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
> Between the crosses, row on row,
> That mark our place; and in the sky
> The larks still bravely singing fly,
> Scarce heard amid the guns below.

*Address given before the Upper Hudson Association of the Phi Beta Kappa February 25, 1921. For an account of the meeting see The Key, March, 1921, p. 426.

We are the dead. Short time ago,
We lived, felt dawn and sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe.
To you from falling hands we throw
The torch. Be yours to lift it high.
If you break faith with us who die,
We shall not rest though poppies grow
In Flanders' fields.

That call could not be resisted. Whole nations and peoples, as well as individuals, answered. In England, Scotland and Wales and part of Ireland, in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and India volunteers flocked to the standards by thousands, by millions. The spirit in which they came and fought is finely pictured in verses also written by McCrae, as an answer to his own Flanders' Fields:

O guns, fall silent till the dead men hear
Above their heads the legions pressing on;
(These fought their fight in time of bitter fear,
And died not knowing how the day had gone.)

Ye flashing muzzles pause, till they can see
The coming dawn that streaks the sky afar;
Then let your mighty chorus witness be
To them and Caesar that we still make war.

Tell them, O guns, that we have heard their call,
That we have sworn and will not turn aside,
That we will onward till we win or fall,
That we will keep the faith for which they died.

Truly these were men who, having sworn, did not turn aside; truly they did keep the faith; they fared onward till they either won or fell. Of such was McCrae himself who with twenty thousand other gallant Canadians at his side lies in Flanders' fields.

Other countries, too, came to the rescue—Roumania, Italy, who bore a brave part and suffered enormous losses. But our own country held back. In spite of tremendous provocations, in spite of the clearest evidence on which side right and duty lay, the American people hesitated. The reasons for this were manifold. In many parts of the country, particularly in the South and West, remoteness and lack of authentic information produced indiffer-

ence. The fight was felt to be none of ours. This belief was fostered by narrow and unscrupulous politicians, who, owing to peculiar political conditions, had, especially in the Senate, an influence out of all proportion to either their number or their ability. In other parts of the country the large foreign population made divisions of opinion along lines quite un-American. These divisions were fomented by a venomous many-headed yellow journalism, which has always been insanely hostile to England and which, while always posing as American, has been most un-American in its aims and its practices. Division and doubt were sedulously increased by a wide-spread socialist and anarchist agitation and by an impudent German and Irish propaganda—all alike anti-Ally and anti-American. Finally there was the pacifist who, horrified at the brutalities of the war, could make no distinction between those fighting for the right and those fighting for the wrong, except that by a strange twist of mind he was invariably more tender to the latter.

To one who loved America and was proud of her, this hesitation, this apparent apathy were disheartening indeed. We seemed to have reached the depth of abasement when at a great political convention, frenzied applause was excited by the repeated slogan "He kept us out of war." Happily he to whom these words were applied has since by a very different course of action won an enduring title to fame. The humiliation felt at America's attitude in such a world crisis was finely summed in Gidding's virile lines:

There is a land
That once was dedicate to Liberty:
A land that cast off kings and set slaves free,
But when it gathered wealth and fame and power,
And could have struck the blow that might have saved
Throughout the world the things for which men died,
The things for which long rows of graves were made,
It would not strike.
It let its own go gurgling down to death,
And did not smite.
Self-made, self-damned, self-governing,
It hammers now, and smelts.
And ever as it pounds, it sings,
This Tubal Cain—of peace!
Beneath a sulphuring sky it dwells—at peace.

Even from the first, however, there were braver and more patriotic voices, and as time went on and the truth became clearer, these became ever louder. As an answer to the indifferent, and the selfish, and the pacifist, came the ringing words of Powers, in which he nobly paraphrased an ignoble song:

I did not raise my boy to be a coward,
To bear with blood unstirred whate'er befalls,
To skulk, or shirk, or flinch in times untoward,
To stop his ears when need or honor calls.

I did not raise my boy to bide in pleasure,
When duty summons him to suffer pain;
To call mere easeful plenty good; to measure
All by the paltry rule of private gain.

I would not have him cringe when proud ambition
Fares forth full-armed to work its lawless will,
To use his own upon some base condition,
Or look on weakness outraged and be still.

Better, far better that my boy were lying,
Foredone and shattered on the stricken field;
Better, far better that my boy were dying,
Where freemen, sore fore-foughten, scorn to yield.

I love him not? Ah me! Too well I love him,
To have him live at ease full-fed and whole,
A recreant to the righteous God above him,
A traitor to his birthright and his soul.

Moved by such voices and thoughts as these, that represented her truer self, America finally entered the war. She entered late—almost too late for her honor—but she entered whole-heartedly. Party rancor was laid aside; sectional differences were obliterated; class distinctions forgotten. Men and women of all classes and ages pressed forward to offer their services in whatever way acceptable. On every hand, time, money, comfort, life itself were freely sacrificed. The splendid spirit of patriotism and devotion that swept over the whole land, the ideal of knightly service shown, were thus expressed by one who went forth eagerly at his country's call and who never came back.

Long was the time we waited,
Each act sifted and weighed,
Stilling our growing anger,
Sheathing the half-drawn blade,
Patiently shaping our judgment,
Seeking that justice be done,
Till into our hearts the truth was borne
How justice must be won.
Division has passed from our councils,
Doubt as a tale that is told;
Clanging into the balance
We hurl our steel and our gold.
This is the night that our champions
Keep with vigil and prayer;
This the night when our armorers
Rivet the mail they shall wear.
And when the arms are proven,
The toilsome road made clear
That leads them to the thundering lists
To ride the barrier,
They shall buckle on their armor,
They shall take the shield and lance,
And sail by the great bronze goddess
That lights the way to France.

And who can adequately describe the heroism of those young men who set forth, imbued with this spirit? The writer of the lines just quoted was with the 27th Division in the great battle in which, fighting against tremendous odds, it broke the northern end of the Hindenburg Line. Wounded in that battle, he, like many another, refused to leave the field, and pressed onward till he received his death blow. When the two-days' fight was over the field was strewn with American bodies, every man, as an Australian observer said, going forward when he died. And when the roll was called, thirty or forty in each company reported out of a hundred and fifty or more who went in. As I visualized that roll call from the descriptions that I had received, these lines telling of it came to my lips:

"Sound the assembly," "Company B
Fall in." "Attention." Up they stood,
Battle-worn, caked with dirt and blood,
And answered the roll of the company.

About the sergeant faced and said:
"All present or accounted for"
(Thirty in line, and a hundred more
Lying out yonder wounded or dead).

Thirty, ready to strike a blow,
Ready and eager to fight again,
And out on yon field a hundred men,
Lying all with face to the foe.

Call the roll! Did a single son
Of our company falter or basely yield?
Was there a man on that glorious field
That fought for selfish gain to be won?

The Judge that sifts the hearts of all
Looks down upon that field below,
And there sees lying, row on row,
Those who went bravely to his call.

The pure in heart, the faithful friend,
The tender, valiant, and the true,
Each following his soul's vision through
Danger and trial to the end.

Not one with recreant spirit nor
A man that did not singly fight
For country, honor, truth and right.
All present or accounted for.

Through all the horrors of the war, above all its cruelties and barbarism, compensating for its enormous waste of treasure and life, there stand forth the heroism, the high ideals of these men; there stands forth the one high, dominating thought, that for them and for us it was a war for righteousness. It was a war to fulfill Lincoln's aspiration that government of the people, by the people, and for the people should not perish from the earth. The ideals that it represented and begot, the understanding and comradeship that it engendered between different sections of this country and between this country and others that fought shoulder to shoulder with it, bade fair, if fully realized, to make a regenerated world. So only, indeed, could such lavish outpouring of treasure and blood be justified. For true victory was not secured by the war. It could be secured only by pursuing that war to its legitimate conclusion.

Was the conclusion so pursued? Alas, no! As we complete our survey we are forced reluctantly to admit that, so far as America was concerned, the war ended too soon. Had it lasted even a little longer, the union cemented by the blood and tears shed in a righteous cause might have been effected. The country might have become united as it was not before, as it is not now. The ties that bound us to our great allies, England, France, Belgium, Italy, might have been so firmly established that malignant cunning and alien hatred could not loosen them.

The fates willed otherwise. By a natural revulsion after such a supreme effort, the spirit of patriotism abated. The old party rancors were revived with a bitterness and a littleness almost unparalleled in our history. Old sectional and class differences were renewed. And what we must remark with the greatest surprise and sorrow, the old plague spots that the war was thought to have obliterated broke out afresh. Again and ever more loudly has risen the voice of those who would repudiate our share in the war, would attack our allies, would renounce all American ideals; the voice of the pacifist, of the traitorous yellow journalism, of the pro-German, the Sinn Feiner, and the Bolshevist. The shame of it is that to these hateful, un-American voices our politicians and some that we call statesmen have given subservient heed; and, because many are thus misled, it has followed that the fine spirit of patriotism and devotion of 1918 has fast degenerated. We are no longer united. Our aims have become more sordid, our ideals lowered; our outlook has become more and more narrow and selfish. Party has been put ahead of country. An ideal of generous international co-operation which represents the things for which our sons fought and died, has yielded to an outworn and provincial policy of isolation, or rather, it would seem, to no policy at all. Never has the country seemed so destitute of leaders possessed of both ability and courage; and yet never were combined ability and courage more needed in order to cope with the gigantic problems before us. Vision is lacking, and where there is no vision the people perish.

And so by this survey we have come to the point of our question. "What shall it profit America if she gain the whole world and lose her own soul?" For if conditions thus continue, her soul, her national life will fast disappear.

Is this statement too pessimistic? Is America indeed in such peril? To answer that let us consider the symptoms from which she suffers.

First and most universal of these symptoms is discontent. This manifests itself in the feverish desire for wealth, and position, for material things the incessant pursuit of which smothers the finer side of life and character and too often realizes the prediction, "He that hasteth to be rich shall not be innocent." It manifests itself in the reckless extravagance of the age which spends without satisfaction, despising the economy for which the growing misery of the world so loudly calls.

> "This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
> That inward breaks and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies."

A like restlessness and discontent lead to class jealousies and hatreds, to the labor disputes, marked by greed and selfishness on both sides, and—facilis descensus Averni—to the ravings of the Bolshevist and communist, whose program is destruction and whose outlook is one of unmitigated sordidness. A milder but perhaps equally mischievous manifestation of the same discontent is the itch to legislate—the futile striving to remove by a stroke of the pen ills and grievances that time and education alone can eradicate.

The second symptom of the times is disloyalty—disregard of the laws and of that which the laws represent. Disregard of the laws guarding property and person has produced the wave of criminal violence that has swept over the country. Disregard of the laws of commercial intercourse finds its expression in greed, extortion, and repudiation of business obligations—practices much too prevalent, which, unless checked, will shake the very foundations of national prosperity and honor. Disregard of that which the laws represent—of America and Americanism—is found in many ominous forms—in the increasing propaganda and treasonable practices of the Sinn Feiner, pro-German, and Bolshevist, and in the growing indifference to the ideals represented and the obligations created by our participation in the war. To my mind a very sinister manifestation of this spirit, that should be even

more disquieting to the victors than the vanquished, was seen in the last election. For of the enormous majority cast for the Republican side it is quite certain that a very large proportion consisted of a mass of foreigners, who, changing suddenly from one side to the other, voted from motives not connected with America at all. The great mass of Germans, that is, voted as they did because of their resentment at the peace treaty and their thought of what Germany would gain by their vote; the Irish because they thought Ireland, or rather the revolting faction in Ireland would benefit, or because they had been so bidden; the Italians because of resentment about Fiume; the alien Bolshevists because Lenine and Trotsky opposed the League of Nations. Speaking not as a Democrat and not as a Republican, but as an American, I feel it a matter of grave concern that we have in our midst millions of men, whose vote can be swayed by their interest in a foreign land or transferred at the dictates of some outside influence temporal or religious.

The third symptom is what for a want of a better term I shall call superstition—meaning by that a persistent and intolerant clinging to a belief, whether religious, political, or educational, which is contradicted by reason or experience. The growing skepticism of the day has diminished somewhat the power for ill of religious superstition, but superstitions of the other sort are many and exceedingly mischievous. The Russian anarchists, we are told, are without belief in religion or even in ethics, as ordinarily understood, but are yet dominated to a fanatical extreme by a political superstition which is causing untold misery to millions. Perhaps we pride ourselves on our superiority; yet our political superstitions that chain us slavishly to party and make a fetish of its principles have been exemplified never more strikingly than within the last two years. The ease with which we change our constitution to reverse the course of human nature may be contrasted with the stubbornness with which we cling to outworn methods of electing a president and of registering the popular will as expressed by an election, or to the persistency of the belief that diplomats, statesmen, soldiers, sailors, and the means of national defense can be extemporized overnight. The latter superstition cost us thousands of precious lives during the war. Educational

superstitions, especially the newer ones, have produced progressive degeneration of our standards, so that the country is filled with multitudes of the poorly informed and badly taught. From this fact, I suppose, springs the further superstition, peculiarly American, which makes a fetish of material success and exalts it above aesthetic, intellectual, or even moral achievement.

These are indeed grievous symptoms, and if, as in fact seems to be the case, they are growing steadily more intense, then truly America has to fear for her soul. Rich she may be and politically powerful; her body will be great and strong; but her soul, her national life, her honor, will have atrophied.

What is the remedy?

A physician when first confronted with a case showing severe and dangerous symptoms, must first relieve these lest the patient die while he is still investigating. So we, confronted with soul-sick America, must stoutly combat her symptoms—seeking to purge her of her discontents, her disloyalties, and her superstitions. For the restless search for wealth, the ostentatious display, the lavish expense we must substitute economy, private and public. A return to moderation and simplicity, making really for the better enjoyment of life and for the appreciation of life's higher side, is greatly to be sought. We must try to end class strife by equitable judgments, by arbitration when possible, by seeking in every way to improve permanently the condition of those who are really oppressed or in distress. Lawlessness we must put down with a firm hand. In business matters we must return to scrupulous honesty ourselves and enforce it in others by material and moral penalties. To the alien that is not of us, whether he is an alien in fact or an American in name, and to the selfish or craven politician that abets him, we must give stern proof that we will no longer tolerate attacks on American principles or on our allies. The despicable yellow journalism and the Bolshevist sheets which foster such attacks we must combat as we would a source of physical contagion. We must strongly oppose the further introduction of ignorant foreigners. Already these are too many; and they have made of this country not a melting pot but, as has been said, a devils' cauldron. Finally we must oppose in every way America's many superstitions. Particularly let us give up our-

selves and combat in others the fetish of an unswerving party loyalty—a fetish whose high priest is the political boss. Not otherwise can we secure political purity and real progress.

The treatment is severe and difficult to apply. It will not succeed unless it is kept up persistently and, in view of the organized opposition that will be constantly encountered, this means perpetual vigilance and permanent organization. Scattering attacks, sporadic reform will not suffice. Of this fact we have had many painful demonstrations.

But even if we constantly combat the symptoms—even if we remove them for a time—shall we say that America's life is still secure? The true physician, while he is relieving the urgent symptoms of a case seeks for the cause underlying them. And what are the causes of the three symptoms of America's unrest, with their protean manifestations? What are the causes of all her discontents, her disloyalties, her superstitions? They are ignorance and selfishness. These two, like the giants in Bunyan's fable, stand barring America's way when she seeks to return to her better self.

And what is the remedy for these causes—the remedy that rightly applied will slowly but surely purge America of all her troubles? Need I point out to an assemblage of Phi Beta Kappa men that that remedy is education? Education in the best and highest sense of the term, it must be. No mere vocational training, no matter how splendidly sustained by wealth of laboratories, by practice of eye and hand will suffice. Such training may produce the best artizans, the cleverest engineers, the acutest lawyers, the most accomplished surgeons, but it will not of itself remove the ignorance and selfishness that lie at the root of our national discontents, disloyalties, and superstitions. It will minister to the body of America, but not to its soul. The body of America must be supported, and therefore vocational training must be carried on and with increasing perfection. But the education that will remove the evils affecting America's soul must produce a higher type of man than one who is only vocationally perfect. The American man must have the fourfold training that shall bring out to the full his capabilities, physical, aesthetic, intellectual, moral. For, following the old Greek ideal, we cannot but feel that true

education must supply in the first place the alertness, the bodily vigor, the abounding health that come from properly regulated universal exercise and clean, temperate living. In the second place, it must cultivate appreciation of the beautiful in nature and in art. In the third place, it must store the mind with information of enduring historic and literary value and train its faculties of observation, memory, and reason, so that it shall be able continually to utilize the store it has and add to it. In the fourth place, it must bring out that without which the rest is but dust and ashes, namely the cultivation of the spirit and the establishment of character. Such an education will realize at once Juvenal's ideal of the "mens sana in corpore sano" and Terence's "Nil humanum a me alienum puto." Such an education will retain the grand old standards; it will not ignore the classics any more than it will philosophy, or mathematics, or history, or the natural sciences, or literature, music, and art. Adapting itself to the man according to his capacity, it will bring out the highest and best that there is in him. Its watchwords, expressive of its fourfold function, will be strength, beauty, truth, righteousness.

In some part, at least, all can and all should participate in an education like this. In its higher phases it can be attained by only a few, and these will be the leaders, guiding the nation to ever better and higher things and helping always to remove the ignorance and selfishness that lie at the root of all our evils.

Is this an unrealizable dream? Is it not rather something earnestly to be sought, as it is devoutly to be desired? And who better than those present, whose ideal of education and life has been built on the threefold motto of our Society—Friendship, Morality, Literature—who better than these, I say, to realize it?

My address ends as it began, with an appeal.

Fellow members of the Phi Beta Kappa! I call on you, who are leaders of men, to fulfill your part and duty. I call on you to see that America shall not in the days to come lose her own soul. I call on you to see that that war which we waged for righteousness shall not have been waged for naught; that those gallant sons of ours who freely gave their lives that American ideals should not perish shall not have died in vain.

For the youth they gave and the blood they gave,
For the strength that was our stay,
For every marked or nameless grave
On the steel-torn Flanders way—
We, who are whole of body and soul,
We have a debt to pay.

For the youth they gave and the blood they gave
We must render back the due;
For every marked and nameless grave
We must pay with a service true;
Till the scales stand straight with even weight,
And the world is a world made new.*

*Theodosia Garrison.

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